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FUTURE RETRIBUTION.

THE publication of book after book on the subject of future retribution shows that it is a question of inexhaustible interest to many thousands. The immense variety of opinions respecting it in the minds of deeply religious men shows, further, that it is one which occupies the border lands of Christian doctrine, and cannot be brought under the domain of rigid dogma. The fact that many clergymen in the highest positions of the church have expressed, unassailed and unimpugned, that "larger hope" for the great mass of mankind beyond the grave which would once have been visited with penal disabilities, is a decisive indication that during the past few years there has been a great modification of Christian opinion. It is not my purpose in this brief paper to enter into any elaborate arguments about the punishment of the guilty beyond the grave. Those who desire any contribution that I could offer to the general discussion will find it in the Westminster sermons on "Eternal Hope," and in a reply to Dr. Pusey, called "Mercy and Judgment," which has led me into a fuller and closer examination of this question and the views of the church respecting it in different ages. With

those books I am quite content to close my share of the controversy, and I am deeply and thankfully sensible that they have had their share in disencumbering the current theology of a multitude of religious teachers from a frightful and fatal incubus of false opinion, which rested on no better basis than the accretions of corrupt opinion in ages of ignorance and darkness. Mistaken conceptions that can plead a long prescriptive toleration are apt to put on the airs of abstract right. They would fain pose as the sole orthodoxy, as the decision of councils, as the *norma fidei*, as the voice of the church. Those who have accepted them without examination, and who see them shattered to pieces, have vainly tried to brand with the stigma of heresy the destroyers of their subjective idols. It has been shown that half of the assertions about everlasting torments for all but an insignificant fraction of mankind, rest on assumptions that are about as valid as the Donation of Constantine, or the Decretals of Isidore. It has been proved, beyond possibility of reasonable dispute, that no council of any authority whatever has ever identified the popular theology with prescribed dogma; that the doctrine has been one respecting which churches widely differ; that while most fathers, schoolmen, and divines have apparently believed in an endless hell in its crudest form, and have done so most unanimously and most unreasoningly in ages when the vast masses both of the clergy and of the laity were sunk into their deepest torpor of blind traditionalism, yet many divines of the most splendid eminence—and among them Origen, one of the greatest, noblest, and most laborious scholars that the church ever produced, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, a canonized saint, the president of an œcumenical council, the sole theologian except St. John to whom the church has ever allowed the title of “the Divine,” and one who had a share in the fixation of the Nicene Creed—have taught a milder view. It has been proved further by a long catena of authorities that many of those whose names are most highly honored in the Universal Church of God, while they have not seen it to be their duty to brave the insolence of theological hatred, or the tyrannies of the secular arm that priests were able to direct, have proved that their acceptance of the common teaching was only nominal, by dropping hints and using expressions entirely irreconcilable with it. Further than this, the pretended defenders of “the horrible decree” have of late, though only of late, been so eager to limit its incidence, to soften its horror, to mitigate its application, and to open doors of hope

for the misery of mankind in other directions, that their views, except for the recurrence of a few phraseological shibboleths, show but little appreciable difference from those of their brethren who occupy a more advanced position. Still further, there is one significant sign that, though many still prefer to believe in the coarsest and most sweeping denunciations of fire and brimstone, and "obscene threats of a bodily hell," either their belief is simply verbal or else they are shamefully false to their own convictions. For what are the facts? Scores of sermons are yearly published by men who prefer to hold these doctrines, or wish it to be believed that they do, and who yet either do not in their published sermons make any allusions to them at all, or only in the most distant and conventional language, and with an infrequency and an inadequacy that are startlingly disproportionate to their terrific importance. The ignorant slander of those who seem to think it a merit to "lie for God" has again and again charged me with "denying hell." The simple truth is, that if by "hell" be meant the solemn law and fact of retribution both here and hereafter, I think few living clergymen have dwelt upon it more often or more strongly than I. If it be true that one of the Caroline divines, preaching at Whitehall, told his audience that "if they abandoned themselves to their irregular appetites they must expect to receive their reward in a certain place which 'tis not good manners to mention here," even this wretched euphuism had in it more of sincerity than the reticence of those who, professing to believe that the majority of their fellow-creatures are dropping day by day, like a shower of agonized rain-drops, into an endlessness of inconceivable and flaming torture, never in whole volumes of homilies make any use of their belief. And why do we scarcely ever, in these days, hear sermons of the Jonathan Edwards stamp? For these reasons among others: because, even in his own day, Jonathan Edwards disgusted, offended, and stunned the greater number of his adherents by utterances that he himself entirely believed, but which we now read with shudders of inexpressible abhorrence; and because the wider knowledge of mankind, the revelations of science, the more vivid apprehension of Christ's revelation of God as a God of love, the deeper hold upon the meaning of the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection, the destruction of the degraded fetishism of a letter-worship, that stopped short at the letter of Scripture without attempting to understand it; these and other influences of the

dawn have so educated the moral sense of congregations, that they revolt at teachings which they feel to be false to all that is likeliest God within their own souls. In the thirteenth century it was possible to believe in such a hell as that which Dante describes, although the horror of the conception was quite indefinitely mitigated to the popular conception by the concurrent belief in purgatory, and therefore in the ultimate happiness of the great majority of baptized Christians. But the hell of Dante, in all its vilest details, with its gross physical torments, its indecent fiends, its injustice, partiality, and eternal despair, had been created by long nightmares of sacerdotal dogma in ages of ever-deepening ignorance and corruption. Into its Malebolge and Niagara of blood, and lakes of Stygian slime, had disembodyed the dregs of rabbinic fancy and monastic self-torment during dreary epochs in which the very idea of Scripture exegesis had been radically perverted, and in which masses of doctrine were built like inverted pyramids on the narrow apex of misinterpreted metaphors. How far Dante himself meant his vision to be taken as a counterpart of real things must remain uncertain. Hell to his great and glowing soul was the concrete form assumed by its own burning indignation against wrong. This intensity of a heart lacerated by so fierce a spirit of hatred against contemporary crime magnetized his theology. In those days it was as much as a man's life was worth to question the dominant dogmas, nor was there, indeed, any desire to do so, for they were strong enough to strangle for centuries the instinctive movements of the soul, and to render impossible the spiritual estimate or honest examination of assertions which the reason scarcely ventured to approach, but on which, in their one aspect of truth, the fancy exercised all its power. There are sufficient evidences even in Dante's "Inferno" to show that the belief in such a hell as he depicted had reacted most unfavorably upon himself, and that it would have been fatal to his moral nature if it had not been counterbalanced by the holier forms of imagination. It is also clear that he felt himself compelled to smite back as with a bar of iron all the incipient questionings of an agonized moral sense. But beliefs that were possible in the thirteenth century are not possible in the same form in the nineteenth, when they are seen under the light that shines on so patiently, and wherewith "God shows all things in the slow history of their ripening."

Nothing could have manifested more strikingly the gradual but certain change of Christian opinion than Dr. Pusey's answer to "Eternal Hope," in the book called "What is of Faith as to Everlasting Punishment." It was the only answer to my book that seemed to me to be worthy of a moment's notice, or to which with any self-respect I was able to reply at all. However strong might have been his original conviction that my teaching was "mischievous,"* he wrote with the knowledge of a theologian, and in the spirit of a gentleman and a Christian. But when I read his book I felt that my own work was practically done; I believed him, indeed, to be demonstrably wrong in many historic details and in many special arguments. In the necessarily dry and minute reasonings and references of "Mercy and Judgment," I have given my grounds for thinking so. But such details were comparatively unimportant, and all controversy respecting them might safely be left to the decision of time. It was not so as to the main conclusions in the only points that seemed to me of overwhelming importance. Here I felt that, wide as might be the verbal divergences between us, and different as might be the aspects from which we approached the question, a theologian whose opinions received, from his age, his dignities, his learning, his character, his already published opinions, and his historic position in the church, ten times the weight of anything that I could say, was in substantial agreement with me on everything that I held to be of primary significance. I wrote to him that, as regards the main question, he maintained hardly anything that I impugned; and he wrote to me that I advanced hardly anything that he denied, and that if I could substitute the idea of future development for that of future probation, he thought my views would be in accordance with those of the whole Christian church.†

* In a letter published in the "Life of the Rev. James Skinner."

† In a letter to me, dated July 30, 1880, Dr. Pusey says: "If I had had time I would have rewritten my book, and would have said, '*You seem to me to deny nothing which I believe.*' . . . I would have been glad to begin with what we believe in common, and so to say there is no need then to theorize about a new trial." In another letter, dated August 3d, he says: "It is a great relief to me that you can substitute the conception of a future purification for those who have not utterly extinguished the grace of God in their hearts. This, I think, would put you in harmony with the whole of Christendom."

But I had no need to "substitute" anything. On referring to "Eternal Hope," I found that I had said little or nothing about future probation. I do not think that I had once used the word. My object had solely been to repudiate certain hideous excrescences and accretions to the doctrine of future retribution as commonly taught, which accretions appeared to me to be as unauthorized by the Scriptures as they were revolting to the conscience. I had never tried to explain, or desired to scrutinize, the how or the why of God's future dealings with the human soul. My only desire had been to cut the free soul of religion loose from the corpse of a decaying traditionalism. And I found that Dr. Pusey had practically conceded everything that I desired. He repudiated the notion that it was "of faith" to believe that the vast majority of men had been ever doomed to an endlessness of agony. He admitted that it was not "of faith" to accept the current descriptions of material torments. He held, as I held, the possibility of a penal purification beyond the grave which might be called by the name of "purgatory," if that word did not convoke a number of views that we both rejected. He accepted, if I mistake not, the admissibility of prayers for the dead, which *ex vi termini* involve the conception of possible ameliorations in the state of their hereafter. Our differences reduced themselves to these: He thought that there was in death an almost sacramental efficacy, and that, in the very hour and agony of death, multitudes of souls might be saved whose fate was, to all human appearance, hopeless. His language on this subject seemed to me so startling that I was amazed at the small notice it attracted, and it seemed to lay open his own views to the very charge as to the "dangers" of removing the safeguards of fear that he himself had urged so strongly against me and others.*

If my views were to be stigmatized as lax, because I thought that the door of hope might not be closed forever to all who, at the moment of death, had shown no visible signs of repentance,

* "Take the case of one falling in a duel, but repenting, for the love of God, after he had been mortally wounded. Or that (which made much impression) of an unbeliever who had lately been inculcating unbelief, and who rose from an adulteress's bed to fall back and die in the arms of the adulteress." Dr. Pusey asks even of these, and of Absalom, Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus Epiphanes, etc., whether they may not have repented, and so become salvable *in articulo mortis*. ("What is of Faith," pp. 12-14.)

it seems to me a view infinitely more lax to hold with Dr. Pusey that "a soul dying immediately upon the commission of a deadly sin" may still die "in a state of grace." The only other difference was this: He held that for some, even from the moment of death, there was an endless hell; that is, an endless exclusion and alienation from the presence of God. I had never denied that this might be so, although I did not think that the church had ever demanded such a belief, or that we were justified in laying it down dogmatically as being "of faith." But on one very essential truth I had insisted quite as strongly as Dr. Pusey, and perhaps even more distinctly than Origen, or St. Gregory of Nyssa, namely, that "without holiness no man can see the Lord"; and that the impenitent permanence of a sinful individuality was in itself a hell; and that until sin, and the desire for sin, had been, in whatever way, washed or exorcised from the soul of man, it could never be at unity with the Eternal Goodness, nor could it, even in a physical heaven,—if that were possible,—find the heaven of peace with God.

Views are often rejected on the sole ground that they are popularly branded as "dangerous." The procedure is immoral, and shows a want of faith in God. God is a God of truth, and if we have any belief in him at all, we shall never believe that error is needed as a safeguard of morals. It is historically absurd to argue that the belief in such a hell as that painted by Tertullian or Mr. Spurgeon or Furniss is any protection against the temptations to individual crime. Even when such a belief was unquestioningly accepted, the belief in the atonement, the belief in the possibility of repentance, might, if men chose, be sufficiently "dangerous" to make the fear of hell, even in the basest natures, a wholly ineffectual barrier against sin. It is only the basest natures that can be acted on by fear, and a soul that became virtuous solely from fear of hell-fire is an impossible conception, for such a soul would simply not be virtuous at all. Even Horace saw that it is only by the love of virtue, not by the dread of punishment, that a man can be good. And since the Middle Ages the grotesque descriptions of physical torment have been infinitely more dangerous than nobler, purer, and truer teaching. They have been, in multitudes of acknowledged instances, a direct excuse for infidelity. They have been rejected by the incredulous abhorrence of mankind, and have dragged the vital truths of religion into the same rejection. If there be

danger in the rejection of every element of fear, the vulgar view of hell, being secretly disbelieved even by many who were supposed to teach it, led directly to such false security. But when a true fear—the fear of an induced state, not of a material flame—the fear of inevitable laws, not of arbitrary inflictions—the fear of the displeasure of a God who loves the sinner even amid his sins—the fear of that which we call his wrath as expressed in the working of stern laws that are beneficently intended to teach us what is his will,—such a fear—the noble fear of doing wrong because it is wrong, because God by the structure of his whole revelation, alike in nature and conscience and in Scripture, has shown it to be wrong—is an element in a wise and earnest life. And this element is not in the least weakened by larger hopes for the destiny of mankind; nay, it is indefinitely strengthened; for in proportion as we emphasize the truth, and press home the appeal of God's love, do we teach every true soul to dread a disobedience that involves the resultant misery that we call his anger. Let no man suppose that milder views of the future are of any rose-pink or Della-Cruscan character. They have sprung mainly from the instinctive sense of justice, and from that idea of God which results from many confluent lines of revelation. It is only the rage of theologians awaked from the deep slumber of decided opinion that has thought it witty or becoming to impute to a "mawkish sentimentality" the repudiation, with every muscle and fiber of our moral being, of doctrines that represented the God of love as a Moloch even more cruel than the abomination of the children of Ammon. That repudiation sprang from the study of Scripture, from the growth of criticism, from the widening of knowledge, from the comparison of religions, from the history of doctrines, from truer and juster thoughts of all that man is and all that God is, from a fuller sense of all for which Christ died, from a deeper estimate of the true dignity of redeemed humanity, from a tracing of late ecclesiastical traditions to their corrupted source, from an acquaintance with the liberty that has on this subject been always accorded to Christian opinion, from a contemptuous disarming of

"Blind Authority, beating with his staff
The child that might have led him."

Nevertheless, we relax no nerve of righteous indignation; we not only offer no impunity to the four classes whom God most

hates,—murderers, adulterers, hypocrites, and liars,—but we point them to a more just, a more natural, a more certain, and a less imaginary punishment. So far from weakening the majesty of God's two great angels of Duty and Conscience, we add a deeper awfulness to their looks of calm yet intolerable indignation. We convince bad men that they are what they make themselves, and that this is hell; that there is no outer darkness so deep as that of a self-darkened and alienated soul; that if a man would be at one with God, he must put on Christ and put off his own polluted self. Do we, then, make void the law? Yea, we establish the law! But, though we remove no safeguard of honorable fear, there are certain things which we do, and these, in conclusion, I would briefly mention.

First. There are many who have accepted what they call the doctrine of "Conditional Immortality," the old rabbinic belief that the hopelessly wicked are first tortured, then annihilated. We do not accept this view. We do not, indeed, either condemn it as a heresy, or withhold communion from those who have adopted it. We frankly admit that something like this seems to have been the opinion of Irenæus and of Justin Martyr, and that it may derive a certain apparent sanction from the letter of Scripture literally interpreted. But for ourselves, we believe in the immortality of the soul, on the grounds on which it has been held by the vast majority of Christians, and, indeed, of mankind in all ages, and we do not feel ourselves justified in holding that some souls are, and some are not, immortal.

Second. We refuse to dogmatize about a multitude of details respecting which rabbis, and fathers, and scholars, and theologians have dogmatized incessantly, but respecting which the views of Christian antiquity have differed, and the voice of the church is absolutely silent.

Third. We insist on the wise old rule of theological reference that *theologia parabolica non est demonstrativa*. We see clearly that a very large part of the teaching that assimilates the Christian to the Buddhist and the Mohammedan hell, has been simply based on the oriental metaphors, on popular expression, and on the graphic scenery that surrounds the central meaning of parables; and that from such sources no such conclusions can be drawn.

Fourth. We reject many of the current proofs that have been so inexcusably perverted from their proper meaning to be pressed into a controversy with which they have no connection.

The rejection applies especially to the greater number of passages adduced in this controversy from the Old Testament. Any one who, at this time, can still quote so totally irrelevant a phrase as, "Where the tree falleth, there it shall lie," simply puts himself out of court, proves only his own incompetence to understand the simplest conditions of any scriptural argument.

Fifth. We refuse to give to fluid popular expressions, to current phrases of a vague meaning that varies with the context,—like the Hebrew *sheol*, the Greek *ᾠώνιος*, and the English "eternal,"—a rigid significance, which is partly excluded by the only light thrown in Scripture upon their usage, and partly expresses a conception to which those who originally used them had never attained at all.

Sixth. We refuse to ignore the fact that there are in Scripture distinct autonomies of teaching on this subject, which only confirms the impression that we derive from the whole course of human history and the gradual progress of human knowledge, that God never intended to draw the curtain from the details and the secrets of the world beyond the grave. If one set of expressions in Scripture point to the annihilation of the wicked, and another set of expressions may, by the liberal help of inference, be interpreted to imply an endlessness of torment, and another set of expressions, taken in their own plain sense, and in common with the arguments into which they are introduced, indicate an apparent final restoration of the whole universe into the blessedness of the divine life,—then it is clearly beyond our power to dogmatize with any confidence upon the whole subject, but we fall back with perfect faith upon the certainty that the Judge of all the earth will do right, and meanwhile we are true to the best we know when we guide our whole lives in accordance with his eternal moral laws, and take our conception of his sovereign attributes of love and mercy from the revelation of himself which all of us believe that he has given to them in the Son of Man, the Saviour of the world.

F. W. FARRAR.